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Next 1 Page(s) In Document Denied

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

15 May 1987

Lebanon: Reopening Beirut Airport [REDACTED]

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"We have provided security for Beirut..."
 --President Assad,
 8 March 1987

Summary

Beirut International Airport (BIA) resumed limited operations on 10 May, three months after shelling by the Christian Lebanese Forces militia forced its closure. As a result, BIA could reemerge as an air transportation hub for terrorist groups operating in the Middle East and Europe. Although Syrian troops at BIA probably are on fairly high alert, we strongly suspect that over the longer term Syria will not be able to secure fully the airport and that the soldiers themselves will become targets of Lebanese and Palestinian opposition groups. [REDACTED]

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At present, the Lebanese flag carrier, Middle East Airlines (MEA), is the only airline operating from BIA; Syrian Arab Air probably will be the next airline to begin service at BIA. It is highly unlikely that any Western airline will resume operations at Beirut. The Christian alternative to BIA, Halat Airstrip, may begin civilian passenger flights soon--a Lebanese Government concession to the Christians, who cannot safely transit Muslim West Beirut to BIA. [REDACTED]

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 Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 15 May
 1987 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should
 be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [REDACTED]

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Copy 19 of 40

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[redacted]

The reopening of BIA will facilitate terrorist travel and logistics between Europe and the Middle East. By air, Beirut is only four hours from Paris, and travel time to most other European capitals is even less. Approximately 15 percent of all skyjackings that have occurred outside the United States during the past 15 years began, passed through, or ended at the Beirut airport, far exceeding the number of incidents at any other airport. [redacted]

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Syria's Visible Security Role--Enough Troops, but Security Procedures Suspect

Syrian troops, assisted by Shia gunmen from the Lebanese Army's estranged 6th Brigade, provide security at the Beirut International Airport. Lebanon's pro-Syrian Minister of Interior Abdallah Rassi told US Ambassador Kelly on 13 May that Syrian troops surround the airport and are conducting vehicle, passenger, and baggage searches. Sixth Brigade personnel man checkpoints on some of the roads approaching the airport. [redacted]

[redacted] equipped with BMP infantry fighting vehicles. Since late April, [redacted]

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[redacted] area, just east of the airport, to control access to the airport and the coast from Druze Hizballah-controlled areas. [redacted]

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The Syrians probably are most concerned that Hizballah, possibly in cooperation with pro-Arafat Palestinians, will conduct attacks at the airport to embarrass Damascus. [redacted]

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Since Syrian prestige depends upon the success of the security force to keep BIA open and disaster-free, Syrian troops detailed to the airport area probably are on fairly high alert--particularly during these first days since the airport opened. [redacted]

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Lacking detailed information on the Syrians' security equipment and procedures, however, it is difficult for us to judge how safe the airport actually is for international travel. If security procedures practiced at Damascus International

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Airport are a valid indicator, then it is reasonable to assume that procedures at Beirut Airport are mediocre by international standards. US Government officials who traveled through Damascus International Airport recently found baggage and passenger checks to be lax when compared with airports in Western Europe or even nearby Jordan. [REDACTED]

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Resuming Airline Service

Only Middle East Airlines (MEA), the partly state-owned Lebanese flag carrier, has resumed a regular schedule out of Beirut. On Sunday, 10 May, MEA flew from Cyprus with no passengers and the Lebanese cargo line, Trans Mediterranean Airways (TMA) flew from BIA to Cyprus. MEA has begun flights to and from various European and Middle East cities, including Paris, Milan, Zurich, Geneva, and Athens. [REDACTED]

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To date, no other airlines have resumed operations at Beirut Airport, but the most likely next candidate is Syrian Arab Air. Before the airport closed in January, the Syrian airline flew weekly between Damascus and Beirut. President Assad probably is willing to use Syrian Arab Air to demonstrate his confidence in the security measures implemented by his forces. [REDACTED]

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In addition to the Syrian airline, the Soviet carrier, Aeroflot, and the four East European airlines that previously serviced Beirut probably are also considering resuming service to Beirut. Before the airport closed, each of these carriers flew to Beirut once a week. [REDACTED]

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There are rumors that the Jordanian airline, Alia, will initiate service into Beirut Airport. Alia had no service to Beirut immediately prior to the airport's closure, however, and we believe that all passenger traffic between Jordan and Lebanon will continue to be handled solely by MEA. [REDACTED]

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We doubt that other Arab or any Western airlines will directly service Beirut. Before the closing, three Western airlines (British Airways, Lufthansa, and Swissair) and two African airlines had special ticketing arrangements with MEA wherein their passengers flew MEA aircraft between Europe and Beirut. If the Syrians demonstrate adequate security procedures at Beirut Airport, these airlines will probably agree to resume similar arrangements with MEA. [REDACTED]

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The Halat Complication

Controversy over the opening of Halat airport--a converted military airstrip built on a portion of the coastal highway north of Christian East Beirut--led to Beirut Airport's closure last January. Christian leaders argued that the Christian community had no safe access to BIA in Muslim-controlled West Beirut and needed a separate airport. In January, Christian Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'Ja issued warnings and finally directed his militia to shell BIA after the Lebanese Government refused to allow civilian flights from Halat. MEA's insurer, Lloyds, promptly withdrew coverage, forcing the airline to shut down.

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The principal obstacle to the opening of Halat was overcome in early May when Druze leader and Transportation Minister Walid Jumblatt promised Ja'Ja he would appoint a committee to approve flights by MEA from Halat and other military airstrips. The Lebanese Forces issued a public statement of support for the committee, which was followed by Lloyds' agreement to resume coverage for MEA. The airstrip will be considered, in effect, a "third runway" of BIA by the Lebanese Government. Bilateral air agreements allow governments to designate airstrips for international flights.

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Halat is likely to begin limited passenger service for the Christians soon, in our view, although the runway presently may not meet international safety standards and can only handle small aircraft. Besides MEA flights, we expect initial service to Halat to be limited to private planes and small charter airlines.

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If the agreement to allow Halat to open collapses, we believe that the Christian hardliners will renew efforts to disrupt activity at BIA. Ja'Ja almost certainly wants to avoid the direct clash with the Syrians that is likely to occur if he resumes shelling BIA. Ja'Ja may instead target selected Syrian military personnel--possibly near BIA--with car bomb attacks, for which he can deny responsibility.

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